

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-209](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

School buses transport over 26 million students to school and other activities every day. While school buses have a strong safety record, crashes with fatalities and injuries do occur. Since school buses transport precious cargo—our children—government and industry strive to further improve their safety. Federal and state agencies both oversee school bus safety, and locally, school buses can be operated by school districts or private contractors, working on behalf of school districts.

The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act included a provision for GAO to review school bus safety. GAO examined (1) fatal crashes involving school buses for 2000 to 2014 and (2) federal and state school-bus-related laws and regulations, among other objectives. GAO analyzed two sets of data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute on fatal school bus crashes for 2000 to 2014, the latest year for which data were available; reviewed federal laws and regulations; and systematically searched state laws and regulations on school-bus inspections, driver training, and maximum vehicle age and capacity in all 50 states. GAO also interviewed federal officials from the Department of Transportation (DOT), school bus industry associations and manufacturers, and other stakeholders.

DOT reviewed a draft of this report and provided technical comments that GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-17-209](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

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SCHOOL BUS SAFETY

Crash Data Trends and Federal and State Requirements

What GAO Found

Based on GAO's analysis of data for 2000 to 2014, 115 fatal crashes involved a school bus on average each year—which is 0.3 percent of the 34,835 total fatal motor-vehicle crashes on average each year. The school-bus driver and school-bus vehicle (e.g., a defect) were cited as contributing factors in 27 percent and less than 1 percent of fatal school-bus crashes, respectively. Seventy-two percent of fatal crashes occurred during home-to-school and school-to-home travel times. Limited national data on school bus crashes exist beyond data on fatal school-bus crashes, but some states have richer data—for example, on the type of bus or whether the operator was a school district or private contractor.

Federal laws and regulations set requirements for certain aspects of school bus safety, and state laws and regulations in many cases go beyond the federal requirements. Federal regulations for school-bus vehicle standards and driver licensing apply to both school districts and contractors. DOT has reported that new school buses must meet more Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards than any other type of new motor vehicle. Federal safety regulations for commercial motor-vehicle operations apply in certain cases, such as for contractors hired by schools to provide transportation for extracurricular activities across state lines. Based on a systematic search of state laws and regulations, GAO found that all 50 states require school bus inspections while most states—GAO found 44—require refresher training for school bus drivers. However, GAO found that less than a quarter of states set specific requirements for the maximum age and seating capacity of school buses. Overall, according to stakeholders GAO interviewed, states' requirements vary by state for school bus inspections, driver training, and vehicles but tend not to differ based on the type of operator.

Examples of Federal and State Requirements for School Bus Safety

The infographic features a central illustration of a yellow school bus with a worker inspecting it. Three callout boxes provide details:

- Inspection:** A magnifying glass icon. DOT: 49 C.F.R. § 396.17(a) requires periodic inspections. This applies to some school bus operations; for example, a contractor providing interstate transportation for an extracurricular school activity. State: States may set school bus inspection requirements. For example, a state may require an annual inspection by state police or biannual inspections by inspection stations.
- Vehicle standards:** A DOT icon. Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) No. 222 sets occupant protection requirements for school bus seating and restraining barriers.
- Drivers:** A USA icon. States may set school bus driver training requirements, such as entry-level training for new drivers and periodic refresher training.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Transportation (DOT) and state agency information. | GAO-17-209